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ANDREYEV'S "ANATHEMA" AND THE FAUST LEGEND

BY O. R. HOWARD THOMSON

It is a fact of no small significance to the historian of literature that a scant two years before Tolstoi, the last of the great Russian writers born in the second and third decades of the last century, passed away, a young compatriot should have produced a work which it would seem must ultimately win for him recognition at least equal to that bestowed upon his predecessors. It is a fact of still greater significance, in the history of human thought, that this young Russian—Leonid Andreyev—has, in seizing upon the *Faust* legend and breathing into it the spirit of nineteenth-century agnosticism, given an interpretation of the problem involved that differs as fundamentally from that developed by Goethe, as Goethe's drama itself differed from its literary ancestor, the *Book of Job*.

Primarily as much an interpreter of human problems as he is a dissector of human brains, Andreyev has not hesitated at times to abandon his morbid studies, such as *The Abyss*, *Dilemma*, and *The Seven Who Were Hanged*, and turn his attention to Biblical matters. He took Lazarus and portrayed him as a ghoul escaped from the tomb destroying his fellow-men: he seized on Judas Iscariot and showed him, half hero and half demon, daring to share death with Christ. The old answers to the old riddles appear to him insufficient. He seems to ask, "Who knows the truth about anything?" When such a man lays violent hold of a world legend like that of *Faust*, that which he has to say cannot fail to be of interest.

The *Faust* story is to-day associated with the trial of Job, but it is well to recall that the link which unites Faust of the Middle Ages to Job the Hebrew patriarch was forged

by Goethe. In the original story, as given in the sixteenth-century *Volksbuch*, there is no prologue wherein Satan makes a bet or wager with God; nor is there any such scene in Marlowe's *Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*. But both in the *Volksbuch* and in Marlowe's drama Faust is damned, while the later-evolved lover of Marguerite is saved, as Job was saved. It is the wager of the Evil One with the Deity that transforms the story from a tale of warning into a theological or ethical thesis. Goethe, by the insertion of his "Prologue in Heaven" deliberately made the scheme of his *Faust* resemble that of *Job*, justifying himself to Eckermann with the statement that if such a resemblance existed it was a thing for which he should be praised rather than blamed.

Totally different from Goethe's is Andreyev's conception. It is true he has retained the machinery of a prologue, of a lifelong fight ending in death, and of a post-mortem reward, but he has so melted the materials in the crucible of his mind that, poured out on the ground for our inspection, they assume shapes difficult for us to recognize. The whole thing is at the same time familiar and strange. The prologue opens, not in Heaven, but in a deserted place that rises up to huge iron gates tightly closed and indicating the boundary of the world as we conceive it. To these gates comes the Mephistopheles of the Russian drama, *AnatHEMA*—some one accursed. But he is not at all glorious nor heroic nor almost omniscient, attributes which, owing to Vondel, Milton, and Goethe, we have come to regard the Devil as possessing. He is rather contemptible in appearance, prone to crawl on his stomach, reminiscent rather of Wagner's "Alberich" than of Milton's "Lucifer." And he knows no more of ultimate truth, of what God is, or of the meaning of the universe than men do. He does not converse with God, for at the Gates stands the Guardian who bars the way and who answers him enigmatically. He is even ignorant of the true name of the Deity and, like an Adonist, stumbles in his speech when he attempts to pronounce it. When he cries to the Guardian of the Gates, "Call the name. Illumine the way for the Devil and for man," he is informed that such knowledge will never be his. This transference of a portion of both the ignorance of man and his desire for knowledge onto the shoulders of the tempter is as significant as it is original; while the fact that the

wager, if wager it can be called, is made, not with the Deity, but with a sententious, non-communicative blocker of the way to full knowledge, makes the issue infinitely more doubtful than is possible where Omniscience consents to have the justness of its confidence in the integrity of its servant put to the test.

That, rebuffed by the immobile Guardian of the Gates, Anathema should swear to return to the earth and ruin the soul of David Leizer creates no surprise. Why should he refrain? The game is not difficult. Leizer is neither an intellectual giant like Faust nor a possessor of position like Job, but an insignificant keeper of a little shop in the south of Russia. In the drama, as apart from the "Prologue" and "Epilogue," there is nothing supernatural, no melodramatic or sulphurous appearance of a horned being with cloven hoofs, not even bargaining or bribery. Anathema simply tells David Leizer that he has become immensely rich through the death of a relative; and David, a virtual beggar, become Cræsus, for a short time enjoys anticipating the pleasures and comforts his wealth will bring him. But he must be ruined, so Anathema points out to him the needs of the poor. He says: "Every ruble in your pocket is a knife which you thrust into the heart of the hungry. Distribute your fortune to the poor, give bread to the hungry." It is true David dislikes the idea of death, and such actions will not make him immortal; but, says Anathema, "By their life you will prolong your life. Now you have one heart—but then you will have a million hearts." This nineteenth-century devil is more subtle than the whimsically satirical Mephistopheles, whose chiefest bribe is a woman. Anathema is confident that the distribution of Leizer's sudden wealth among the poor will result, not in permanent good, but in a riot of evil jealousies and unrestrained passions. And he who ruins his fellow-men shall be damned! He is persuasive, and under his influence David becomes lyrical. He pictures himself as feeding the poor little children. He says: "I myself shall bring them bread and milk. . . . Children are so tender. . . . They need so little; they eat a little crust of bread and they have enough; they drink a cup of milk and they know no thirst any longer. Then they sing. . . ." The inevitable happens. The people flock to the feast and the distribution that David offers: they bring him their young to feed, their

sick to heal, their dead to raise; but he can neither feed their young, nor heal their sick, nor raise their dead, and his riches are not sufficient that every one may have a little. They clamor and threaten till, in fear of his life, aided by Anathema, David flies only to be caught by the mob and stoned to death. Then Anathema returns to the Gates to taunt the Guardian with his victory. He boasts that when he left the earth a million throats were crying: “ David is a deceiver! David is a traitor! David is a liar!” and is astounded when the Guardian informs him that David has attained immortality. The game is not fair. His efforts and achievements are nullified. It would seem that, like Mephistopheles, he “ always wills the evil and always works the good.” He is to a certain extent sorry for David: when he saw David die he, who has not a heart, doubted for a moment if a heart could not be born. But he looks at the matter as Nietzsche viewed it. David lived a futile, weak creed and gave his own soul away. Not having fed the hungry, not having restored sight to the blind, and not having raised the dead, he has merely stirred up dispute and bloodshed—he incontestably manifested the powerlessness of love—the people committed crimes in his name. After all, he questions somewhat like Pilate, “ Where is the truth?” only to receive the answer: “ My face is open, but you see it not. My speech is loud, but you hear it not. My commands are clear, but you know them not. And you will never see, and you will never hear, and you will never know.”

At this point nothing remains except the summing-up of the matter, and Andreyev injects into Anathema’s final retort all the bitterness, venom, and subtlety of the modern supermen who, pledged to a gospel of pure reason, attack revelation. The Guardian who apparently knows the truth refuses to speak except in riddles, while, because of his enigmatical utterances, crimes are committed in his name. Anathema, therefore, will go back to the earth to proclaim how good David was, what a sin it was to kill him, and to stir up other people to kill those who killed David. “ Then,” he remarks to the Guardian, “ I shall announce to the people that you are the one who killed David and the people—they will believe me. For you have such a bad reputation—of a liar, a deceiver, a murderer.”

The differences between Satan, Mephistopheles, and Ana-

thema are no greater than those between Job, Faust, and David Leizer. Each of the tempters and each of the tempted represent the thought and aspirations of the periods in which they are made to live. Job, typical of the Hebrew patriarchs, is a man believing sturdily in God and enjoying the number of his sons and daughters, his flocks, his herds, and his fields. His trial is to have that which he has acquired taken away: his reward to have it returned increased in magnitude. The problem is simple, not complex, as with Faust, who is consumed by a thirst for knowledge. Job, as befits the thought of his race, is the prize played for by higher beings; Faust, the product of the Renaissance, the searcher after knowledge, is the cause of his own danger. Moreover, whereas Job is simply a victim, Faust is a bribe-taker till, grown satiated, he, at the age of a hundred, devotes his energies to the reclamation of land from the grasp of the sea in order that he may establish thereon a free people. The earthly reward to Job consisted in an increase of his possessions; to Faust the "highest moment" was when he saw as in a vision the fruit of his labors—"a free people living on a free soil"; a people engaged in labor it is true, but only because "he only earns his freedom and existence who daily conquers them anew." Noble as was Faust's impulse, there is nothing to indicate that he contemplated self-effacement. Like his creator, he knew himself to be of the aristocracy of intellect, and abdication would have seemed to be mere foolishness. Looking in spirit on his completed work, he rejoices that "one mind," his mind, "suffices for a thousand hands." He is of his time, a feudal overlord, and ignorant of what we to-day understand by the brotherhood of man. On the other hand, David Leizer is of the nineteenth century, saturated with the spirit of Tolstoi. He does not consider himself superior to other men; he desires no reward beyond the knowledge that others are happy; he will accept no means of subsistence that his fellow-men cannot share. When, having given his soul in love to his people, they turn on him and stone him to death, he does not complain; he accepts his lot with resignation, so that Anathema says, "I saw how his spirit, grown dark, curled up piteously like a dead worm in the sun."

Devoid of the slightest diffuseness of language or irrelevancy of incident, Andreyev's poem moves forward with the

relentlessness of a Greek tragedy; its pathos is poignant and its lyric bursts, though dominated by the melancholy of minor chords, irresistible. Yet, despite its poetic beauties, it is as an interpretation of an old legend in the thought of to-day that it will live. That for neither Marlowe nor Goethe the “ unknowable ” of Spencer existed and that the supermen of their days had not developed the doctrine that self-abnegation is the equivalent of the betrayal of the race does not diminish the achievement of the Russian poet. He has taken the Spirit of Evil and made him the mouthpiece of the modern schools whose attacks on revelation, on the one hand, and the Christian code, on the other, bulk so largely in the ethical discussions of to-day. His answer to the problem is the same as given in the older stories. Job was rewarded, the Angels carried the immortal part of Faust up to Heaven, and the Guardian of the Gates says of David Leizer: “ David has attained immortality and he lives forever in the deathlessness of light, which is life.” Which is another way of saying that the explanation of this world lies in the next, and if this be not true the problem to all poets seems insolvable.

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